

Dorchester Reporter

"The News and Values Around the Neighborhood"

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City to Strand Management: Exit, Stage Left

Longtime Managers Decline to Bid for Contract

May 5, 2004

BY JIM O'SULLIVAN

A non-profit neighborhood group will end its 25-year run as operator of the Strand Theatre, after the City of Boston decided not to renew the organization's lease on the Uphams Corner building when it expires June 30.

The city will designate an interim director to replace the M. Harriet McCormack Center for the Arts as administrator of the Strand, with plans to request bids for a permanent management team in the fall, according to Boston director of Neighborhood Development Charlotte Golar Richie's testimony at a Tuesday night City Hall hearing.

Joyce Williams, a member and past director of the McCormack Center (MCA), said the group does not plan to vie for a new contract.

Richie said the city was bound by Massachusetts's 1990 Uniform Procurement Law, which rules that government property worth more than \$25,000 must be opened to a bidding process upon expiration of its lease.

Strand management, headed by MCA-appointed executive director Victoria Jones and her daughter, marketing director Lisa Jones, became embroiled in public controversy earlier this year, when the Bay State Banner reported charges of financial woes, inept leadership, and eroding trust among community arts groups.

Victoria Jones and other Strand officials countered that they had been underfunded by their landlord, the city. At Tuesday's nearly-four-hour hearing, deputy director of the city's capital construction division Andy Hudak released documents showing the city planned to fund Strand structural improvements with \$1.4 million in fiscal year 2003, and the administration's budget plans \$1.1 million for FY05. But none of the \$2.5 million has been spent, Hudak conceded.

He said a February survey of the plant found \$2.5 million in "critical needs," but had focused on code and safety measures, rather than on architectural and detail restoration. A review of those factors will be completed within two months, Hudak said.

"I would like to see the city treat us the way they treat the Opera House, as if we were downtown," said Williams, who served as the city's elderly services commissioner until earlier this year, when she left for personal reasons. "Of course, we are not downtown, and I understand that, and I understand that we are in a neighborhood and it's a neighborhood that not everybody wants to go into and all that. But I do think there is a need, a desperate need, for the Strand in Uphams Corner."

Richie said that no other non-profit arts facility receives free rent and operating subsidies from the city.

"We have proceeded with care and respect for the many years of history the McCormack Center has in working with the Strand, and will continue to collaborate in the future," Richie said.

With the lease running out at the end of June, the Strand has cleared its books of any future events, and returned any money their organizers had paid, Williams said.

City officials said they were not aware until the hearing that the Strand had canceled summer acts. Richie said after the session closed that the city had spoken with acts scheduled to play the venue later in the summer.

Dorchester City Councillor Charles Yancey, who joined councillors Chuck Turner and Felix Arroyo in calling for the session convened by council arts committee chair John Tobin, said the MCA was "walking away" from the Strand, and accused the Menino administration of "a certain callousness here, a certain disrespect for this institution and its future."

"I think the direction you're going in right now is very dangerous, the direction the city's going in, and the apparent concession on the part of [the McCormack board]," Yancey said, addressing Richie, Williams, and McCormack board member Robert Haas.

The Strand is slated to host the Indiana state delegation at a July 25 party on the eve of the Democratic National Convention. Mayor Thomas M. Menino told the Reporter in March that the event would not be imperiled by the Strand's uncertain future, but Yancey said Tuesday that "a national embarrassment" could ensue if the Strand's relations with the city remain shaky.

According to Susan Hartnett, the city's cultural commissioner, who said she was in her seventh day on the job, the interim operator could be an individual or a non-profit, and the city had not decided whether the temporary manager could bid for the permanent post.

Menino appointed a task force in March, headed by former AOL vice chairman Kenneth Novack and membered by neighborhood and arts representatives.

Williams said she was "very disappointed that a task force was named," and said "I don't want you to think that Ken Novack is doing something unique because we have been doing those things," after Richie said Novack had contacted Harlem's famous Apollo Theater for ideas.

Turner proposed a community board to monitor the Strand's course. Richie said the city would take it under advisement, and pointed to several local members on the task force.

No one from the Strand's hired management team attended the meeting. Williams represented the MCA volunteer board in place of its chair, Juan Everteze, who had been admitted to the hospital Tuesday, she said.

Tobin said he was surprised that Victoria Jones did not attend.

"I know that if I was under siege and there were newspapers that my supporters allege were saying untrue things about me, I know I'd come and defend myself," the West Roxbury and Jamaica Plain district councillor said.

Lisa Jones recently gave birth, said another board member.

Heywan Small, who works for SponsorMusic, a company that links commercial sponsors with acts and venues, said she arranged for an event at the Strand, but that theater management provided inadequate security and staffing that left the event in the red. Also alleging that the Strand fabricated that the number of tickets sold for the event, Small said she spoke Tuesday via telephone with Victoria Jones, who said, "I have 40 days left. What the [expletive] do I care?"

The prospect of a Strand vacant for the summer alarmed Suzanne Wilkins, a former part-time contract worker at the theater who testified at the hearing. Wilkins, who ran a curriculum designed for local schools and wrote grants for the theater until last year, said youth-oriented initiatives like a Saturday-morning puppet program have already been discontinued due to insufficient funding. A performance art program for youths ages three to 19 would be axed in a summer folding, she said.

Rodney Black, owner of African Roots, a heritage paraphernalia company he said the Joneses invited into the Strand to peddle its goods, credited the current team with serving the community, and helping young people.

Several testifiers criticized press coverage of the ongoing dispute, alleging unfair bias against Strand management.

The session was held in the Piemonte Room, because a ceiling panel fell onto the Iannella Chamber desk of North End Councillor Paul Scapicchio over the weekend.

BCA's Baxter to lead Strand

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THE EDGE

TERRY BYRNE

115 Words

19 May 2004

Boston Herald

All Editions

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English

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Michelle Baxter, longtime director of programming at the Boston Center for the Arts, has been named interim director at the Strand Theatre in Dorchester.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino made the announcement yesterday, citing Baxter's experience and commitment to the arts community as a director, actor and program manager.

The lease for the Strand, currently held by the McCormack Center for the Arts, expires June 30, and Menino appointed a task force to come up with a plan to reorganize the theater and find a new organization to hold the lease.

The task force will hold a public meeting June 1 to solicit community comments.



In the News:

Michelle A. Baxter

Mayor Thomas M. Menino last week announced the hiring of an interim manager for the Strand Theatre in Upham's Corner, Dorchester, to oversee the operation of the historic theater after the current management team's lease expires. Michelle A. Baxter, a community activist, cultural program director, theater director, and actor in Boston for the past 22 years, will serve as the interim manager for the theater until the city formalizes a new lease with a publicly selected management team.

In addition, the Strand Theatre Task Force announced that it will host a public meeting on Tuesday, June 1, at 6:30 p.m., at the New Boston Pilot Middle School, 270 Columbia Road. Those who cannot make the meeting but would like to contribute comments or ideas can email Strand@cityofboston.gov.

"It's great that Michelle has agreed to come on board and run the Strand while we transition from one management group to another," said Mayor Menino. "I know she shares my concern that we keep the Strand operating as the vital community and artistic facility that it is."

The lease for the Strand Theatre, currently held by the McCormick Center for the Arts, expires June 30. The city will issue a publicly advertised request for proposals (RFP) this summer seeking interest in the future lease of the Strand. The selection process will likely be completed in the fall. Baxter will oversee management of the facility during the interim period.

BayState Banner, May 20, 2004

TAKING A LEAD ROLE AT THE STRAND

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Living

796 Words

21 May 2004

The Boston Globe

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STRAND STAND-IN MAYOR TOM MENINO HAS TAPPED MICHELLE BAXTER TO BE THE INTERIM MANAGER OF THE STRAND THEATRE IN DORCHESTER. AN EMPLOYEE OF THE BOSTON CENTER FOR THE ARTS FOR THE LAST EIGHT YEARS, BAXTER WILL OVERSEE OPERATIONS OF THE HISTORIC CITY-OWNED THEATER AFTER THE LEASE OF THE CURRENT MANAGEMENT TEAM _ THE MCCORMICK CENTER FOR THE ARTS - RUNS OUT JUNE 30. (EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR VICTORIA JONES WILL REMAIN IN CHARGE UNTIL THEN.) MENINO ENLISTED BAXTER'S HELP AFTER QUESTIONS WERE RAISED ABOUT JONES'S MANAGEMENT OF THE 1,400-SEAT AUDITORIUM AND ITS PROGRAMS.

City Asks Public's Take on Strand

Kenneth J. Novack, chairman of a city-appointed task force examining the Strand Theatre, sent the following letter to the community this week.

Dear Strand Community Member:

My name is Ken Novack and I am the chairman of the Mayor's Task Force on the Future of the Strand Theatre. As you know, the Strand Theatre is a vital institution for Upham's Corner, Dorchester, and all of Boston. Mayor Menino wants the Strand to be a healthy, strong institution for many years. At the end of March, he appointed our Task Force to facilitate a process to help him create a vision for what the Strand can be well into the future. That process includes seeking input from community stakeholders and looking at best practices in theater management around the country.

A central part of creating that vision is hearing from members of the Strand community - neighborhood residents who attend shows, youth who want to act or work in theater-related jobs, performers and producers who bring their work to the Strand stage, local businesses that benefit from activity at the Strand, non-profit organizations that partner

with the Strand to provide programming for the community, and many others.

In order to receive broad community input in a thoughtful and constructive manner, the Task Force has engaged a consultant, Marsha M. Morris, who has experience running meaningful community processes. Marsha and members of the Task Force have already started conducting interviews and focus groups with some of the many people interested in the Strand. The Task Force will also be holding an open, public meeting where all are welcome. That meeting will take place on Tuesday, June 1 at 6:30 p.m., at the New Boston Pilot Middle School located at 270 Columbia Road in Upham's Corner. Please come and invite friends and colleagues who are interested in helping shape a new vision for the Strand.

I hope you can join us on June 1. If, however, you are unable to make it and would like to submit ideas or suggestions for the Strand, feel free to forward them to me at Strand@cityofboston.gov.

Ken Novack

Public's Views on Strands Sought

The chairman of the city-appointed task force examining Uphams Corner's Strand Theatre has called for a public meeting on June 1, at 6:30 p.m. in the New Boston Pilot Middle School on Columbia Road. Kenneth Novack said in a letter to the community that the task force would solicit community opinion on how to shape the Strand's uncertain future. (See full text, page 10.)